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ABSTRACT

English teachers are usually well situated to hear the gravest concerns of their students. Because of this, English teachers must be prepared to deal with students who come to them about catastrophic events, ongoing trauma, or deep hurts and frustrations. During the initial encounter, it is important to keep the student talking, to accept all feelings and statements made by the student, and to avoid asking "why." In a crisis situation, if a teacher decides to stay with the student instead of going immediately for professional help, it is important to find out about the student's immediate future plans by asking low-level, factual questions to elicit specific details. With the exception of abuse of any kind (physical, sexual, or psychological), a prior understanding of confidentiality between the teacher and student must be honored. If a student alleges abuse, teachers have a duty to report (by state law) all such allegations. In addition, any overt mention of threat of suicide must be taken seriously and dealt with immediately. In these situations, it is important to make a contract, insisting that the student agree to call someone if at any time he or she feels suicidal. It is also important to realize that there are no guarantees, and that teachers can only do what they can. (MM)

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TALKING WITH STUDENTS IN CRISIS: A BRIEF GUIDE

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Teachers of English are unusually well situated to hear of the gravest concerns of students in their classes. English is unique among school subjects in that its real focus is often upon the actual lives of students. We urge our students to write personally, to communicate openly; and we present works of literature which derive their power from their authors' ability to do these things. We also have three advantages over other subject-matter teachers: first, we find our examples in good and great writing; second, we approach difficult subjects indirectly, through metaphor, story and myth, thereby letting our students find their own way into the situations and characters; and, third, we can legitimately and constructively ask our students to write to us about their own lives, because their best writing is often done when they do. But these very advantages give us grave responsibilities if we become the teacher selected to be told about catastrophic events, ongoing trauma, or deep hurts or frustrations. What can we do then? What follows begins with a brief guide to what do say in the first few minutes of a first talk, and then some suggestions about how to continue that talk, that first intimate sharing. This is by far the most crucial time; everything that follows, and therefore any possibility that we may be of real help, depends on what happens in this initial encounter with our students' hardest quandaries or deepest fears.

1. The First Exchange

A student has just told you something of terrible importance, in confidence--or has written such a thing, and you have sought the student out as a result. Since your own feelings are stirred too, it is especially hard to focus, and therefore to be helpful. Three principles, if borne in mind, will help. They are:

--Keep the student talking. So long as the student is talking, don't interrupt. Basically, this means accept and acknowledge all statements and all feelings. If the student stops talking, ask a simple question about what the student has just said, using the same words he has just used.

--Accept all feelings as they are expressed. Say such things as "that must have felt awful," or, "it sounds as if you were really in a bind." Don't say, "I know how you feel." You don't. And besides, the student may feel you're trying to compete with him.

--Never ask WHY. ("Why do you feel this way?" "Why haven't you told your parents?," etc.) To ask such questions is the greatest temptation, but it is a temptation to be avoided at all costs. To ask "why" is to assume that your student knows why he drinks or why she got pregnant or why she is suicidal. The reasons are largely unknown--that is, unconscious--and they are certainly

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complex, too complex to be put into language at this time. Finally, "why" is a teacher's question, not a helper's, and you have been approached because your student thinks, consciously or unconsciously, that you can help. The whys can come later.

To summarize: keep the student talking, accept all feelings and statements, and don't ask "why." If you keep your mind focused on these principles at the beginning of the talk, you will be far more able to stay in there with your student, listening and being accepted, rather than letting your own feelings and fears confuse you and the situation. This isn't to say that you won't be feeling. You will. But that's why it's helpful to be working from a set of guidelines, however simple, and not solely from your own instincts. You might find it helpful to "practice," in your imagination, having such a conversation while keeping these three principles in mind.

2. Deepening the Talk

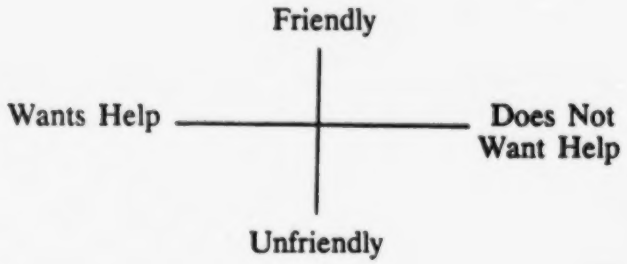
In a crisis situation you face the choice of staying with the student or going immediately for professional help--typically to the school social worker or an administrator. Let us assume now that you decide it is better for you to stay with the student yourself, at least for the time being. If you do, bear in mind that the talk is happening right now. This is in itself a good reason for keeping attention focused on what is happening now in your student's life. How do you feel right now? Are you scared to be talking with me? What would you like to have happen right now?

Then, find out about the student's immediate future plans. What will you do after this class? The rest of the school day? Where do you plan to go after school? How will you get there? If the answer to this last is "home," ask specific questions about it. Get schedules, daily routines, who does what chores, and so on. But listen carefully for tensions or signs of anxiety when the student talks about home life. If the problem is at home--abuse, an alcoholic parent, neglect--and you come to find this out, explore alternatives. Is there a friend with whom the student might stay? If the problem is that the student is himself using drugs or alcohol, it is wise, and legitimate, to ask whether the student is high at the moment. You need to know what you're dealing with.

Note that you are asking low-level, factual questions here. You want to know what is happening, and will happen, very specifically. Above all do not judge, and do not ask the student to do so. So don't ask open-ended questions such as "How are things at home?" You want reports at this stage, not judgements. Judgements, as Hayakawa says [in Language in Thought and Action] stop thought. Remember that your goal is to keep the student talking.

By this time you will have a sense of where the student is, emotionally and of where you are as well. Here is a schema [from John Rich, Interviewing Children and Adolescents. London: Macmillan and Co., 1968, p. 28] which can help you to conceptualize what you are trying to do at this point in your

conference with your student. It depicts the teacher as perceived by the student (friendly/unfriendly) and the student's perception of himself (wants help/does not want help):



Presumably, or ideally, the student who comes to you for help is in the upper left quadrant, but this is by no means always the case. The choice you face with a student in any of the other quadrants is, in which one direction (at a time) do you wish to move the student? For example, a student who wants help but sees you as unfriendly needs to be moved "vertically upward;" a student who does not say she wants help but who is clearly troubled needs to be moved "horizontally" to the left, and so on. In the first instance, asking the low-level questions suggested above may be very useful; in the second, focusing on the student's feelings might be the better choice. The thing to remember is to try to move the student in one direction at a time. You can focus on the problem, or you can focus on being open and available, or you can be a good listener, or you can skirt around the problem for the moment, hoping thereby to defuse the student's anxiety and deepen his sense of being comfortable in your presence. The thing is not to try to do all of these at once. To do so makes you seem panicky and disorganized.

3. Confidentiality

With one crucial exception (see below) a prior understanding of confidentiality between you and a student must be honored. For example, if a student has told you something in a personal journal for which you had promised privacy--that you would be its only reader, for example--you might well begin your discussion of what you've read by saying, "I know this is something you wrote me in confidence, and it will stay just between us, but I'm concerned..." Such an opening shows that you respect the contract you have made and reinforces trust. That same trust will make it easier for you, later on in the talk to ask about bringing in a counselor or social worker or other professional. If the student says no, that's the end of it. For the moment. But you've planted the suggestion.

The exception to confidentiality must be made if the student alleges abuse of any kind--physical, sexual, or psychological. Most states now have laws which establish that a teacher has a duty to report all such allegations. In practical terms this means that you, or you and the student, would go to the school social worker or a counselor, who would then contact the state's department of children and family services or its equivalent. You must tell your student that you have no choice in the matter. Any one of the following constitutes sufficient grounds for making a report:

--the student says abuse is happening;
--someone admits having abused someone else;
--any report of an eyewitness, including yourself;
--your own reasonable suspicion, based on physical evidence.

State laws usually mandate that the report be made within 24 or 36 hours, and many states include simple neglect as a form of abuse. You should also know that states that have "duty-to-report" laws also generally have statutes which, for obvious reasons, give the reporting person immunity from subsequent civil or criminal prosecution.

4. The Suicidal Student

Any overt mention or threat of suicide must be taken seriously and dealt with immediately.

The suggestions about how to begin talking (above) apply with special force here. Ask, what is happening right now? Is there a crisis, an unexpected catastrophe, or has the student been feeling depressed for a time? Does the student have a plan, a method, by which he has chosen to kill himself? If so, what is it? When does he think he will he carry it out? Where?

As you listen to these answers, pay careful attention to the plausibility of the plan. A student who plans to jump off a bridge in a town where there are no bridges to jump from has an implausible plan and is at lower risk than is a student who has a gun and plans to use it. Look also for "rescue-ability," the likelihood that the student will be found and saved before death. (Most people who slash their wrists are found and saved, for example, as are many people who overdose. Guns, on the other hand, are especially dangerous as a means of suicide.)

Ask, "What would happen if you did this?" Listen here for indications of who the student's "intended victim" actually is. Many suicidal people have vivid images of the sorrow--and the guilt--of a loved one or a parent. They represent the person the student wants to attack. Just hearing this may help to lessen some of the anger involved, and the information is of enormous help in subsequent therapy.

Ask about drugs and alcohol; these are often involved. Ask whether the student has ever had medical or psychiatric treatment, or has ever worked with a therapist, a church person. Were they helpful? Would he be willing to return

to this person now? Lastly and most important, make a contract. Insist that the student agree to call you or someone you designate if he at any time feels he might harm himself. Make clear that you give him no choice in this matter. He must make a contract. If the student is not willing to contract with you go with him to a person with whom he can contract. School social workers and psychologists should be well familiar with the idea of the contract: it is fundamental in suicide prevention programs. But, alas, it is true that nothing you, or anyone, can do will guarantee that the student will not follow through with his plan if he is determined enough to do so. You are not a miracle worker or a savior; you can only do what you can.

And that, finally, is the point. You can do what you can, in these difficult and painful situations. You have been reading advice, and advice may or may not fit. In the end, who you are, and how your troubled student sees you, will be what matters.